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Walking through Minefields

"Is the patient your relative?" asked the radiologist, looking at the chest X-ray. I never had liked him, and for some reason his cold and detached voice increased my well-hidden animosity even more. I'd heard rumors that he was hard of hearing and he listened only to his inner voice, but if the hearing defect made him distant and aloof, why was he so arrogant? Well, a sensitive man is born and a doctor is made, and he was a first class radiologist, a superb example of a good mind trained in the best American medical school and hospitals.

But the chest Xray he held in his hand didn't call for a super-expert, for even an inexperienced eye could see lungs invaded by multiple tumors. Two "snow balls"sat comfortably at the base of the left lung and three were suspended on the right.
I saw the verdict in the radiologist's icy-cold eyes and I wanted to move him away from the patient who was sitting close by. In the doctor's eyes one could easily read "death, morte, der Tod, smierc."

The radiologist again studied the Xray, and declared with utter finality, "Metastatic tumor of the lung. Did you find the primary cancer?"
A shade of annoyance in his eyes told me that the consultation was over. What else could be said about a patient with so many "snow balls" in the lungs?

"No." I left him in a hurry clenching the Xrays in my hand and carrying hostility inside me.

The patient was Marteen, my cousin, and he seemed out of place in this drab,

waiting room of the Xray department. He looked like he went through the high pass in Lost Horizon, aging instantly while observing the specialist's face.

He was still the handsome man I remembered from fifteen years before when I have seen him the first time. We had just arrived in the USA with a three-year old son. Our friends took us to their small apartment in Brooklyn and after cordial greetings they told my husband, "We found your cousin. The man has the same first and last name as you and he's from Lodz." My husband stopped unpacking and didn't ask questions. For many years he had written letters to the International Red Cross and other agencies enclosing a long list of the names of his large family. They responded swiftly in the usual manner, "Sir, sorry, we couldn't find the names of the persons or their addresses in our records." I left him alone for I didn't want to tell him, "Don't have great expectations. Save yourself a disappointment, for there were many of your namesakes in Lodz."

The next day a handsome man in his late forties entered the apartment. He was of a medium height and his big dark eyes stood against his white face and brown thick hair. A straight nose, full lips and white teeth emphasized his Mediterranean looks. The man was dressed in a striped shirt, red tie and in a perfectly fitted jacket of multiple-colored stripes that matched the pants, the loud tie and the shirt. It seemed that he stretched the color mixing to the farthest end of good taste but oddly enough he would have looked attractive in any wild combination of colors.

"I heard that my cousin is here," he said searching our faces closely. .
My blond, blue-eyed, reserved husband, in a three-piece gray suit, stared at him. Our little John, by some strange leap of genes, looked like a very young version of the morning visitor. The two men shook hands hesitantly and started a disjointed conversation. They remembered each other vaguely but...yes, oh yes, they were named after an obscure uncle, Morris, who died young. The guest was definitely our cousin, who in America had changed his name to Marteen. The double ee was the

result of a faulty spelling by a careless clerk at the Immigration Office. Marteen took off the multicolored jacket, asked for tea with lemon in a glass, paced the room several times and started to talk about his beginnings in the USA.

"I came to New York from Germany in 1947, exactly twenty years ago, and within a short time I made a fortune." A fortune?! His clothing depicted a man of a peculiar taste but not an owner of a fortune. And I was catapulted backwards, about fifteen years, in Poland, when I heard exactly the same phrase from my husband's mouth. Eureka, I had found their common gene, the gene of Mammonian fantasy, the one that transforms one-dollar bill into one hundred and sometimes into one thousand. The zeros grow in their minds but not in their checking accounts. Soon big numbers in dollars and zlotys were flying like exotic birds in the small room between the two cousins.

Well, the handsome and quasi-elegant Marteen could have made it in Hollywood if his English had been better, but he didn't show any fear of mispronunciation or hesitation of speech. All kind of Englishes I heard in my life, but his had the Polish "sz" and "cz" rumbling, hissing and vibrating in the air combined with flowing expressions in Yiddish and a German soft, rolling "Rs" sparkled with a harsh Brooklynese accent. His grammar was something else and followed his own rules creating a grammatical anarchy. I barely recovered from his "two childs" while he attacked again the tortured and defenseless English complaining of pain in "his feets." From time to time a kitchen sounded like a chicken in his mouth. English wasn't his element.

The next morning Marteen and his wife took us to their house where we lived comfortably till we were well oriented in the American way of shopping, (" Compare the prices") of moving around, (" Fifth is the avenue dividing the West from the East") of dealing with muggers ("Don't fight, have always a few dollars in the pocket and the rest in your socks") and we left when both of us got jobs. We also got from him lessons in American economics ("Your monthly rent shouldn't exceed your weekly salary") and our

new apartment had to pass Marteen's inspection before we signed a rental agreement. There a gift from him, a set of brand new dishes and a bicycle for John waited for us.

He became also our legal advisor without lawyer's trappings and fee. "You must buy a cemetery plot and prepare a will," he recommended, but we were not amused with the funereal advice. Did we look like walking cadavers? His advisory voice continued when we bought a house naturally close to Marteen's, naturally with Marteen's financial help.

I asked him about the blue tattooed number on his arm, which defined him as one of the first inmates of Auschwitz.

"I was in concentration camps since 1940," he said drinking slowly his favorite tea. "The Nazis took me at night and sent me foist to Buchenwald and later I worked in the coal mines. O boy, o boy. Straszny-terrible. There was hard work and hunger but nothing like camp Buna near Auschwitz where I worked as a welder for IG Farben Industrie. You see, I always volunteered when they needed a 'spezialist.' If they called for a locksmith, I were the locksmith. A shoemaker? Oho, here I were. A welder? I were the best welder. I figured out that I'll learn on the job and I was a fast student.

I don't remember the year when Buna was bombed. It didn't do any good for us because the SS men sat in the bunkers and we was the ones who was killed. The bombing occurred on Saturday, a day after the opening of the factory. In a hole made by the bomb a pipe was leaking. Boze moj! I were then the best welder in our group and the Kapo sent me to repair the pipe. 'Der Hund will do it' he said to the SS-man. I went to the hole on shaking knees. The unexploded bomb were as near me as you're now. I repaired the pipe trying not to look at the bomb. When I came out of the hole the SS-man said laughing ' Ha, ha, ha, der Hund pissed all over his clothing.' I didn't piss, it was my sweat which ran down my face and blinded me, but God guided my hand. In 1944 I was on the death march from Buna to Buchenwald and I would have

been dead if not the help of my friends in Buchenwald.

In America it took me a little time to build a factory of women's' clothing. Look at the beauty." He removed a skirt from the closet; "It's my production, real French hot culture. (haute couture) Don't ask where I learned the new trade. From my brother-in law, but he wasn't a big shot designer either. Now we are employing fifty operators." Fifty operators, in real life, were ten but Marteen worked for five. He was everywhere, he was cutting and sewing, cleaning the floor and conducting the business by phone, shipping the merchandise and delivering the final product himself to the department stores.

Marteen, the stylish survivor, fainted at the sight of blood and a hospital made him weak in the stomach. Sometimes his worried wife called me in the middle of the night and I go to his house finding him drenched in sweat, pale, his eyes wide open in horror. Who knows what caused the attacks at night, maybe the memories of Auschwitz and Buchenwald or the loss of his entire family?

I routinely checked his vital signs and I knew that there were no drugs available to erase the memories from his traumatized mind. I treated him mostly with a placebo and returned home to my own war-time nightmares.

Now this man, not yet sixty, had reached his final destination. Marteen's cardiologist who was treating him for a mild heart disease found the"snow balls" in his lungs on a routine chest Xray.

"I'm sorry, Sally, let's be realistic. Both lung are infiltrated by tumors." He patted my hand for he was a compassionate type of a doctor as cardiologists often are. "The oncologist will make the diagnosis." The velvety voice of this perfectly groomed man reminded me of the electronic, wrinkleless, never-bald, never- tired, telegenic doctors who are providing yesterday's medical news on the tube. Slowly I realized that my resentment and hypercriticism had fitted into the "kill the messenger of bad news" syndrome and my anger showed, for my colleague looked at me with concern and said,

"Sally, you're angry." Then he suddenly confessed, " My wife has an advanced ovarian cancer but we found an excellent young oncologist. After many weeks of chemotherapy she's doing well, but you know that cancer is cancer."

I looked at him as if I have had seen him for the first time, this godsend of a man. A few days later his oncologist listened carefully to my "case presentation" supported by numerous Xrays and blood tests. She said calmly, "We must first identify and later fight the disease " and touched Marteen's tattooed arm as if to mobilize all his remaining strength.

"Do I have a chance?" he asked.

"I hope so, but making the diagnosis and the treatment is often more painful than the disease."

" Doctor, go ahead," he said and drops of sweat glistened on his head. His shirt changed from bright to dark green.

Marteen was hospitalized and a series of cuts were taken from his internal organs. One day a bloody dressing hung from his nostril and a wide beige chest drain connected him to a bubbling water bottle.

"Autopsy of the nose." Marteen explained before I kindly corrected him "a biopsy"

" and of the lung. "

Almost every medical specialist in the hospital wanted a small part of Marteen's flesh. They came in the morning and said, "I'll make a small incision in the neck or in the groin or in the armpit. It doesn't hurt." But it hurt like hell.

Some of the young residents looking at Marteen's blue number, joked. "Is it your telephone number?"

"Yes," he matched them joke for joke," it's my direct phone to God."

Finally the beast was identified. It was a malignant and tricky beast, the sly fox among the tumors, who has a habit of a sudden and unexpected recurrence, a lymphoma. Marteen listened to the diagnosis with a pale copy of his previous smile

and waited for the next step, to fight the disease. He didn't survive Auschwitz and Buchenwald for nothing.

Within a short time Marteen lost a good part of his thick hair and became an eyelashes-less individual, white in his face and red in his eyes. Small ulcers appeared in his mouth causing blurred speech, and his English was even less understandable. Puffed up with steroids his open handsome face assumed a moon-like shape and a fold of fat accumulated at the nape of his neck. He lost his appetite for he was constantly nauseated and couldn't even hold his favorite tea. But he was not a sad or pitiful figure and during the long weeks of chemotherapy he never missed a day's work. Nauseated and weak he delivered the pseudo-French skirts to the department stores.

After five months of intense therapy the snowballs melted away as if touched by the first sunrays of spring, and his lungs, in medical parlance, were described as within normal limits.

His hair re-grew changing its color to a pearl gray and his brows became two white bushes over his very alert eyes. His face returned to its usual shape and the skin was mapped with fine wrinkles. He looked perfect in his dark brown sweater, olive jacket, taupe pants and dark brown suede shoes. His red tie didn't match but it highlighted his good looks. He could have had played the role of an aging Valentino in silent movies.

After five years the oncologist said, "Marteen, you don't need me. Take care and send me New Year's greetings, every year."

"Let me see you once a year, Doctor. I don't take good-byes very well."

"O.K." she said, "once a year. And..no more skirts." Reinforced by her success she was bold enough to say "no" to Marteen's skoits.

Marteen retired from his " haute couture" workshop at the age of seventy, beaten by the China and Hong-Kong competition. Two years ago he underwent a successful coronary by-pass operation. I still look at him with a penetrating and worried eye, for I know that all monsters, beasts and malignant diseases have their benign moments too,

but fifteen years is a long time and I believe that the foxy tumor left Marteen's body forever. This summer he announced that he is leaving Brooklyn. Like a real American he has to move four or five times in a lifetime.

"I am bored," he said with a shrug of his shoulders. "The community where I am moving has a swimming pool, tennis courts and golf, you name it, and I want to be close to it"

Tennis and golf? I looked at him bewildered.

"You know Sally," he responded to my question, "I'm a fast student."

"A quick study," I corrected him automatically and while gazing at my husband I added, "Golf? You said golf? We need a little exercise, too."

"Tomorrow." Marteen said, "I'll take you there to look at the houses."